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ABSTRACT

Many teachers note the importance of student ability to analyze and understand intricate uses of figurative language in reading. Research in recent years has focused on the prevalence of figures of speech in textbooks and other reading, suggesting that the fostering of figurative language skills should become a more common feature of language instruction. These studies suggest that the increased focus on developing figurative language skills will generate stronger metaphoric abilities among readers. Unfortunately, such an emphasis is largely ignored, perhaps due to the utilitarian biases of educators. However, to present and develop figurative language ability, utilizing poetry may be the best tool teachers have at their disposal. Testimonies of individual teachers bear out this conclusion in the face of a general lack of clinical studies on the topic. Poetry can be used in various ways to enhance vocabulary development, to encourage more creative and fresh phrasing in student compositions, to generate expressive language through such methods as "clustering," as well as to motivate adult learners who are basic readers. As students elevate their figurative language abilities, the level of poetry used can also be easily raised, from relatively simple and straightforward poems to poems employing very difficult metaphoric constructs (two examples of the former type, by Carl Sandburg and Langston Hughes, and one example of the latter type, by Wallace Stevens, are provided in an appendix). Thus, poetry may be the ideal arena for fostering figurative language skills at virtually any reading level. (Eighteen references are attached.) (HB)

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Poetry and the Teaching of Figurative Language Skills

by

Harold K. Bush, Jr.

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In recent years, figurative language has become of interest to researchers. Many teachers note the importance of student ability to analyze and understand fairly intricate uses of figures of speech. In fact, a higher level reader must deal regularly with figurative language. Ortony (1979) has shown, for example, the prevalence of such figures as metaphors in typical college textbooks, and that even by the 6th grade level, figurative language occurs at least 10 times per 1000 words. Thus, teachers are looking for better ways to foster the development of figurative language skills in their students, and are treating figurative language as an essential part of a comprehensive reading curriculum.

Evans and Gamble (1987) constructed an interesting study in which they tested the abilities of 3rd, 5th, and 7th grade students to understand metaphor. Of particular importance in their study was the ability of the student to recognize what is salient in the vehicle of the metaphor in relation to the topic.

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The 'topic' is the subject, and the 'vehicle' is the thing to which the topic is compared. Thus, in the metaphor, "the red car was the rocket ship of his dreams", the car is the topic, the rocket being the vehicle. In this illustration, the 'ground' is that characteristic which they have in common, which is here speed. Students were asked to identify the salient characteristics; thus, there might be many things in common, but what is the most important?

Examples of the types of metaphors that Evans and Gamble asked the children to analyze are seen in Figure 1. All of the metaphors chosen for the study had been screened through a group of adult readers, and all of them had been correctly analyzed by the adults. In this figure,those listed under "A" are some which were answered correctly by the adult group and the child group at about the same consistency. Those listed under "B", however, are metaphors which are easily analyzed by adults, but somewhat difficult for children.

A	B
Police are hawks on the highway.	Swans are the ballerinas of birds.
The wind is the broom of spring.	The family is an umbrella.
My mouth was a desert.	Her hair was straw.
The road was a banana peel.	The child was the parrot of the family.

Figure 1.

The authors found that the ability to analyze figurative language increases with grade level. Their study confirmed an earlier study of Vosniadou and Ortony

(1983), which found that children tend to relate more to visual imagery in figurative language, while adults are much more aware of structure, function and causal relationships. Finally, Evans and Gamble showed that mistakes in interpreting figurative language most often occur when students rely on attributes which are personally salient, for whatever unknown reasons. In short, the ability to analyze and utilize figurative language is related most easily to the development of relevant schemata. Clearly, then, the implication is that the increased use of figurative language skills will generate a stronger ability among learners. Evans and Gamble conclude the study by stressing the need to work at the development of these all-important skills:

> One would also hope that classroom curricula might place more emphasis on not only the standard meaning of words, but also on increasing children's appreciation of the various attributes of items denoted by words, so that children's semantic representations can serve as a rich basis for both literal and non-literal expressions... the type of metaphor does not determine the ease of interpretation. Rather the ground and the individual's knowledge about the topic and vehicle which forms it, and ability to access and integrate the relevant knowledge, appear to be key factors. (p. 446)

Note the emphasis that Evans and Gamble placed on the "individual's knowledge," or the schemata involved. The conclusion of several studies besides that of Evans and Gamble was that the increased practice of figurative language skills will bring about a greater awareness of and command of the skills. Not surprisingly, that is, practice will enhance a literacy learner's ability. Ross (1987), for example, demonstrated how working on figurative language problems increases a student's ability to interpret similar problems later, apparently as a resulting

increase in the student's schemata for figures of speech. Waggoner, Meese and Palermo (1985) demonstrated that the processes of comprehending metaphorical language are essentially the same as for normal, literal language for many students. Waggoner et. al. called for increased attention to figurative language skills in the classroom as a way of sharpening basic reading skills. Phillips (1986) conducted a study to investigate whether a teaching approach emphasizing literature would affect student written work and how, specifically in terms of form and content. Phillips concluded that literature was extremely beneficial, particularly with regard to technique, sentence length, and sophistication, and suggested that literary materials be used regularly to further student language development. Nippold (1985), finally, surveyed the studies on figurative language skills development in students. Nippold concluded that practicing the use of these skills will develop them. Specifically, Nippold urged teachers to include anecdotal evidence of the uses of metaphor, etc. Also, Nippold stressed the value of training students to notice various similarities between diverse pairs of common objects.

Unfortunately, the cultivation of such imaginative reading and writing skills is largely ignored, perhaps due to the utilitarian biases in our present educational system, as F. E. Kazemek (1987) argues in a recent article. The question is, then, how might the teacher proceed to foster an awareness, appreciation, and expertise of the use of figurative language? How might teachers train students in this area?

Michael Johnson (1988) has produced a compelling argument in his

article entitled "Hell is the Place We Don't Know We're in: The Control Dictions of Cultural Literacy, Strong Reading and Poetry." Here, he suggests that there are three levels of reading, each of increasing difficulty, and that it is the third level to which the most advanced readers should aspire. He adopts a term invented by Arthur Rothenberg: the "janusian reader," one who is able to take control of "two or more opposite or antithetical ideas, images, or concepts simutaneously." This is precisely the kind of reading that is necessitated by figurative language. Also, as noted above, the close analysis of two or more diverse objects through the study of figurative language is exactly the type of training suggested by the findings of the Nippold overview (1985).

Johnson attacks with gusto Hirsch's (1987) notion of cultural literacy as a cure-all for our reading woes. For Johnson, Hirsch's approach is merely a stopgap, nothing but filler information, a kind of "Trivial Pursuit approach to the teaching of reading." Instead, Johnson's solution is to supply readers with a repertoire for filling the gaps, the blanks, the indeterminacies, allowing students to take on the challenges of figurative language in their reading. And, for Johnson, the best tool teachers have for building better figurative language skills is the exploration of poetry:

> I would stress that poetry should have a more prominent role ..... Students and teachers alike typically neglect it, at least partly because of the difficulties inferable from the very reasons why, when well done, it affords the ideal text for third-level reading experiences: the striking intricacies of figuration, the semantic force of what is not said, the poised play of contradiction, the straining against the arbitrariness of the sign and toward both imitative tones and the invention of a "fresh reality." (316-7)

The experiences of many teachers are bearing this prediction out in the classroom. Although there appears to be very little research on the topic of how effective poetry might be in fostering figurative language skills, the testimonies of experienced teachers must not be ignored. The studies cited above give implicit support for the assertion that poetry serves as an important tool for the training of figurative language skills. The reliable case study testimonies of the seasoned veterans buttress this assertion in the face of a considerable lack of research.

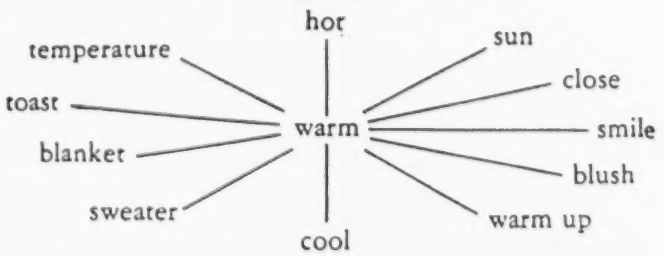
Dwyer (1982), for example, reports that teachers should combine the aesthetic dimension of poetry with skills development, and that his attempts to do this have brought success. He notes the efficacy of the study of poetry in relation to vocabulary development as well as comprehension development. Dwyer presents sample "guides" to demonstrate how this might be achieved. In short, he attempts to bring about a very close reading of what the poem means. The modelling of the interpretation of figurative language along with these "guides" is the key. Through the repeated modelling of how an expert reader/teacher approaches difficult figurative language in poetry, the student gains more and more valuable experience, which can be applied to other texts in the future.

Devet (1988) discusses how she has successfully stressed the use of figures of speech in her composition courses. She states that the composition course should experiment with rhetorical language and devices, allowing the students, through practice, to discover the variety and playfullness of language. She regularly asks her students to search for compelling figures of speech in

everyday places, such as pop songs, advertisements, and newspaper articles. In response to her study, one of the participating students wrote the following evaluation: "I found this writing most helpful because it made me see what effect such writing tools can have on a [piece]. I became more aware of these things in everything I read or wrote"(68). This experience again seems to bear out what we know from common sense: modelling by the teacher and practice of a skill by the student will ultimately produce a stronger ability in the student.

Gardner (1988) discusses her notion of what she terms "clustering", and how the teacher might use this strategy to enhance student skills in the recognition and use of figurative language. A "cluster" simply is a central word, generally written on the blackboard, and consequently surrounded by various words associated with it, the more creative and figurative associations being most preferred. As the students supply the associated terms, the teacher writes them on the board around the central term, as in Figure 2, thus modelling the

Figure 2



generation of expressive language. Then, the student is asked to construct a poem or sentence using the words on the board. Often, as the student becomes more adept at this type of activity, the teacher can challenge the student to use more and

more of the words on the board in the same sentence: "The hot sun had warmed up the car, making it feel as toasty as wearing a wool sweater in Arizona." Gardner has discovered that the use of this technique can facilitate the students' ability to make connections metaphorically. Gardner's activity is similar to that described by Radnofsky (1988), by which students are encouraged to participate in a "mental warm-up" to the day's work by writing down as many words and phrases related to the topic as written on the blackboard.

Other articles, including those by Freeman (1983), Geller (1983), and Tompkins and Tway (1985), provide hands-on, practical activities that teachers from the elementary level on up can utilize in working figurative language practice into their curricula. Finally, at the other end of the learning spectrum, Kazemek and Rigg (1986) have implemented the use of poetry in their adult literacy program with outstanding success. Not only do the figurative language skills of the students greatly increase, but a greater appreciation of the mode of poetry, and of good writing in general has resulted. Also, it appears that an awareness of poetry, and a realization that the student is able to comprehend it, directly influences the self-esteem and confidence of the readers. Although prior to the study of poetry, they might feel ill-at-ease, afterwards there is a marked confidence increase. The researchers were careful to choose poems which are more simple and straightforward in interpretation, such as those by Sandburg and Hughes (see appendix).

However, as the students elevate their figurative language skills, more and more challenging poems can be utilized. In fact, my contention is that there

appears to be no limit to the use of poetry in improving and accentuating these skills, since for any level of reader, poetry of a sufficient difficulty can be supplied. Notice, for example, the quite complex and involved, extended metaphorical relationship between summer and a woman, as developed by Wallace Stevens in his poem, "The Beginning" (see appendix). Certainly, it would be inappropriate for use in the adult literacy program of Kazemek and Rigg, at least initially. The intricacy of the poem demands a high level of figurative language skills which must be developed. But even the most skilled readers, I have found in the classroom, can be challenged by this and other poems like it. The result is the same as reported by Kazemek and Rigg (1986) : greater figurative language expertise, greater appreciation for poetry and language, and a sharper awareness of what constitutes good writing. In short, poetry might be the ideal arena for fostering and enhancing figurative language skills at any reading level.

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Appendix

Buffalo Dusk

The buffaloes are gone.
And those who saw the buffaloes are
gone.
Those who saw the buffaloes by
thousands and how they pawed
the prairie sod into dust with
their hoofs, their great heads down
pawing on in a great pageant of dusk
Those who saw the buffaloes are gone.
And the buffaloes are gone. - - Carl Sandburg

Poem:

I loved my friend.
He went away from me.
There's nothing more to say.
The poem ends,
Soft as it began --
I loved my friend.

- - Langston Hughes

The Beginning

So summer comes in the end to these few stains
And the rust and rot of the door through which she went.

The house is empty. But here is where she sat
To comb her dewy hair, a touchless light,

Perplexed by its darker iridescences.
This was the glass in which she used to look

At the moment's being, without history,
The self of summer perfectly perceived,

And feel its country gayety and smile
And be surprised and tremble, hand and lip.

This is the chair from which she gathered up
Her dress, the carefulest, commodious weave

Inwoven by a weaver to twelve bells . . .
The dress is lying, cast-off on the floor.

Now, the first tutoyers of tragedy
Speak softly, to begin with, in the eaves.

- - Wallace Stevens